A DRAGON APPARENT

000 There was a recognized place about a mile up the river, which was free from weed and rock, and once again, because the water was deep and swiftly running, it was very cold and refreshing. We had
515 been swimming round for an hour or so when we noticed a number of Laotian girls hanging about. They were not watching us, but sauntering backwards and forwards in twos and threes, chatting to each other. By the time there were twelve of them, Dupont, keeping well in the water called to them and asked if we were disturbing them in any way. One of the girls came to the edge of the bank, bowed, and looking down at her feet said that it was their usual bathing time, but that there was no hurry, of course. Dupont asked the girls if they would retire for a moment, and they walked a short distance away and stood in a preoccupied circle while we got out of the water. We then dressed quickly and walked on down the path leading to their village. After about a hundred yards we looked back. All the girls, quite naked, were in the water. At that moment two bonzes were strolling slowly along the bank past them; but the girls paid no attention. The bonzes were wrapped in the mantle of holy invisibility.

622 When we reached the village, Dupont asked punctiliously for
304 the headman, making the excuse that he wanted to visit the pagoda. It was quite evident that this headman was in the good graces of the garrison, and probably supplied them with labour. He was very dignified and had a fine house, with European furniture. Although barefooted, he wore a French suit. On the suggestions of the soldier from the camp he took down his trousers and showed us his legs, which from ankles to thighs were tattooed, in the local manner, so
796 closely that he seemed to be wearing stockings. The annual *boun* [1]
782 had just been celebrated at the local pagoda and a bonze was in the
532 act of sweeping into a heap the votive offerings with which the floor
285 of the courtyard was littered. There was a great collection of elephants, buffaloes, peacocks and tigers, all woven in basket-work. The kind of thing that Picasso produces when he is not painting, but perhaps rather better. They seemed to me to be of

[1] [i.e., religious festival.--Analyst]

69: Lewis T-5 (1950) 1951 AM1 Indochina
Laotians AM8

the greatest artistic interest. I asked the headman if it would be 796
possible to take any, as the bonze was crumpling and smashing them 782
vigorously with his broom. But the chief shook his head regretfully. 532
Buddhism had degenerated in these remote provinces and was 285
swamped with re-emergent spirit cults. These objects had been
dedicated to the *phi*[1] and would have to be burnt in a ritual fire.
The *phi* would also receive the burnt essence, I noticed, of a large,
very obscene, and no doubt magically valuable picture.

At about this time when the bonze was treading underfoot the 669
village's artistic output of several months, a party of Issarak or Viet- 726
Minh, timing their action to coincide with the convoy's arrival at 731
Moung Kassy, had set fire to the forest just south of the post. A
steady breeze was blowing from that quarter, and the fire, started
over a width of about a mile and fanning out as it advanced, moved
slowly towards the fort.

Coming up over the river bank it took us some time to realize
what was happening. There was a haze; but then there was always
a haze in Laos, although by this time of day it should have been
clearing and not thickening. And then we heard the crackling,
punctuated with the sharp pops, which might have been distant
rifle fire, but which were the explosions of thick stems of bamboo.
Looking up then we saw the curtain of smoke hanging over Muong
Kassy, white at the top, and black at its base and streaked occasion-
ally by lance-points of flame, which were still two miles away.

We ran to where the car was parked, started it and tried to drive
down the road towards the fire. Dupont was as pleased with it as
July 14th. In about fifty yards we got tangled up with the convoy
and had to leave the car on the side of the road and run on. The fire
was advancing on a ragged front and was as irresistible as a volcano.
Black smoke was being blown before it so that at first the flames
were out of sight; but when they came through they were two hun-
dred feet high – twice the height of the tallest tree. It went forward
in zigzagging rushes; eating its way quickly through the bamboo

[1] [i.e., spirits. – Analyst]

"The wooden panels which formed the walls, the corbels, and 341
the beams were all carved with great delicacy. This pagoda was 346
as pretty in the fineness of its details as it was elegant in its gen- 172
eral lines.

"But nothing is left of it" (1).

1. Cf. G. Maspero, L'Indochine /Un empire colonial francais: l'Indochine. Paris, 1929-1930/, p. 186.

Sculpture. For these sanctuaries, the Laotians made hordes of 532
statues out of stone, brick, and especially bronze, which were 175
wholly or partly covered with gold. Of the latter, which were al-
ways molded from wax models, some attained gigantic size. /127/
All of them strike the various attitudes of the Buddhist liturgy. The
bodies are sketchily draped and may be seated, standing, walking
or lying down, their arms outspread. The faces are surmounted by
a sort of tiara and are frozen in a hieratic smile which is not very
expressive and seldom varies.

Painting. As for the fresco paintings which brighten the walls
of certain pagodas, they are not of any special interest. Most of /177/
them were "primarily the work of Burmese, Cambodians or Chinese
of whom the native artists (were only) the pupils" (1).

1. Cf. L. de Reinach, op. cit. /Le Laos, posthumous edition, Paris, 1911/, p. 342.

The art of the gold and silver smith. On the other hand, the 326
Laotian jewelers and silversmiths knew and still know, with only
the most meager of tools, how to work gold and silver admirably--
primarily silver--and how to chase and engrave it. Their motifs
show an attractive decorative invention, and it is chiefly in this
"minor art" which borders on small-scale industry that we find the
most original manifestations of old-time Laotian life /128/ --
betel services, vases, cups, sword and dagger hilts; bracelets,
necklaces, rings, headpins, earrings, etc.

Basketwork and weaving. Finally, "like all the peoples of the 285
Far East, the Laotians are skilled in all kinds of basketwork. A 531
very pretty object which seems to be peculiar to this land is the
small basket for women in which the basketwork is covered with

285 lacquer -- red on the inside and black on the outside -- and deco-
532 rated with a fine gilt design which makes a border, like a galloon" (1).
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1. Cf. G. Maspero, ibid. /Un empire colonial francais: l'Indochine. Paris, 1929-1930/, pp. 190-191.

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286 Even today weaving remains women's work, and is done solely in
462 the home. The materials, which may be silk or cotton, striped or
532 splashed with colors, embroidered or spangled with gold and silver thread, nevertheless acquire, under the action of light and carefree hands, chatoyant, harmonious or dazzling tones, and yet the looms which are used are simple in the extreme. Patterns "are obtained, as before the invention of the Jacquard loom, by alternately isolating or raising certain woof threads by means of thin bamboo splints" (2).

2. Cf. L. de Reinach, ibid. /Le Laos, posthumous edition, Paris, 1911/, p. 333.

181 Thus did the Laotian of the seventeenth century live in peace, respecting the law of the least effort with an amiable perserverance amidst his laughter and his games. . . . The princes were perhaps the
/565/ only ones in the whole kingdom to know any of the worries which power and its exigencies bring, and it was for not having wished to compromise with his authoritarian principles that King Souligna, towards the end of his reign, compromised the destinies of his people forever.

643* Condemnation of the heir apparent to death. He had three chil-
175* dren, a son Tiao Ratsabout and two daughters. His son married Nang-
648* Tian-Koumali, who gave birth in her turn to two children, King-Kitsarath and Intha-Som. Nang-Tian-Koumali was the sister of a prince of the Sip-Song-Panas who had been driven out of his country by a Chinese invasion and whom the king of Lan-Xang had welcomed in Vientiane together with his family. Tiao Ratsabout, however, committed the imprudence of seducing the wife of the chief palace page. In accordance with his edict which punished the crime of
/684/ adultery by death, Souligna pitilessly referred the deceived husband's complaint to the royal tribunal and allowed his son to be sentenced to capital punishment

The result was that at the king's death, which occurred /130/ in 1694, the direct heirs to the crown were his grandsons King-Kitsarath

314 The wax is not of uniform quality in Laos, but varies in color and texture depending on the region, the type of bees [336] which produce it, and also on the flowers on which the latter feed.

In this land there are hive hunters who have a rare skill and an extraordinary flair. They are able to find wild hives in the confusion of the forest foliage, in hollow trunks and in rocky crags where no one else could. The methods used to capture the swarms of bees and their hives differ little from those in use in Europe, and include noise, music and smoke.

[789] The Laotians claim that some bee hunters are able to get rid of the swarms of bees by attracting their queen by means of the sound of a kind of flageolet and by pronouncing certain cabalistic words.

435 The price of wax is quite high. A hundred kilograms cost 250 francs in Luang-Prabang, 219 francs in Nong-Khay, 290 francs in Cammon, 300 francs in Song-Khone and Saravane, 333 francs in Bassac, 208 francs in Attopeu, 312 francs in Stung-Treng, 500 francs in Korat, 250 francs in Pnom-Penh, and 300 francs in Cholen.

15. Rattan (Vai).

314 The rattan is a palm tree of the genus Calamus rudentum and Calamus petraeus. There are several types in Laos, which are used
285 in accordance with their particular qualities.

The rattan industry is still in its early stages. A few Kha tribes of southern Laos traffic in rattan and supply the needs of local consumption, either in the form of crude rattan delivered in bundles, or in the form of mats and baskets, at a price of five francs per thousand or about sixty kilograms. It is present in great abundance throughout the whole land, and in northern Laos is even used for trade with Siam, which produces little rattan.

It is to be hoped that among the samples sent from Laos to France there will be some good ones which can be used abroad in the manufacture of all the wickerwork and esparto articles whose consumption is constantly increasing. This would provide an appreciable source of revenue for the land.

16. Bamboo.

313 There are some twenty varieties of bamboo. All [337] [Illustration] [338] [Blank page] [339] except one of these grow wild, the exception being the golden bamboo (Mai-So-Kham), which is chiefly cultivated in the enclosures of pagodas.

The following description of the many uses of bamboo is taken from the interesting work by Mme. Massieu:

149: Reinach--247 G-3 (no date) 1901 AM1 Indochina
Laotians AM8

"What makes everything easy and is used for everything is this hollow wood, at once so solid and so light, the incomparable bamboo. In France we see it only in the form of pleasant but useless little articles of furniture. Here bamboo is sufficient to every task. It provides the whole house, frame as well as walls. The inner walls and floors are made of matted bamboo lathwork. Yet such a house, with its furniture, bed, tables, various accessories and its luxury objects, if you are a person of refinement, can be improvised for you in a space of two hours wherever you want.

"Has a bridge been washed out? In two hours, thanks to this wood which is easy to manage and to work, men will have made a new bridge. One is especially struck, at the beginning of this life which is so free and, more than any other, independent of men and things, by the great simplicity and ingenuity of all the procedures. Objects are rudimentary but practical, easy to make, soon ready and simple to repair. Everyone knows how to build ordinary furnishings, and no interruptions are caused here as they are when even the slightest damage occurs to one of our highly developed utensils, which only a specialist knows how to repair.

"A bamboo tube is a safe place for your maps and papers. It is a drinking glass, and it is also a pipe for smokers. On a larger scale, it is a bucket for carrying water, and the receptacle for all liquid and solid provisions. When provided with a handle it serves as a pot for the Laotians to cook their rice in, or to prepare syrup from the sugar palm. When torn into thongs it is used as rope and string. Ligatures of sapeks are threaded on kelates, or bamboo filaments, and this is what makes our new Indo-Chinese sou, with its round hole in the middle, so impractical. Those who preside over the striking of our coins are unaware that the kelate is square, a fact which the first comer from the interior could have told them. Baskets of all kinds are made with these same kelates for holding and transporting material. Hats are also made of them to provide shelter from the sun and rain. At night, when the stage of your journey is too long and you have to continue after nightfall even at the risk of meeting a tiger, setting fire to a bamboo branch is enough to frighten any off and to light your way. And not only is bamboo used to make torches, hats, string, dishes, furniture, houses and bridges, but it also serves as animal fodder and even as food for the natives, who eat the tenderest shoots as we would eat asparagus.

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When thus prepared the mold and the crucible, which form a single block, are placed on the furnace with the crucible undermost, amidst the charcoal which is given a forced draft with an alternating bellows. What happens then cannot be imagined. The wax melts with the first heat and falls into the crucible, leaving a void between the two walls of the mold which the metal will fill. As soon as the latter is ready, as can be seen by the color of the flames which come out through the lateral openings, the founder seizes the block with a pair of tongs and turns it upside down suddenly so as to pour the contents of the crucible automatically into the cavity of the mold. After the metal has cooled the clay envelope is broken like an egg shell, and the object appears with the shape and relief or chased ornaments which the wax model possessed.

The founders use various alloys, depending on whether the objects which they are making are statues, common utensils or bells. Some are made of brass, zinc and tin, others of red copper, silver and
[778] bronze from old gongs, etc. Sometimes, when the statue is a religious one, the faithful are impelled by their ardor to throw gold and silver jewelry and coins into the crucible.

The principal pieces of equipment of the founder are the bellows, crucibles, tongs, a series of sculptor's boasters, an alternating turn-bench, graving tools, scrapers, hammers, etc.

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Basketry. The inhabitants of Laos, especially the Khas, are past masters in the art of basketry, and the objects which come from their hands have a finish, a delicacy, a seal of elegance and a purity of form which are surprising at first sight.

Rattan, certain kinds of bark and thin skins and strips of bamboo are the materials used in basketry.

The main articles produced by this industry include floor mats, bed mats, calibrated baskets for measuring grain, buckets for drawing water, large baskets, baskets for holding cooked rice, platter covers, trays with feet, boxes for betel necessities, baskets to carry on the back, bird cages, hats, etc.

[463] Most basketwork articles are delivered unfinished, although some are smoked or else lacquered black or red. Except for a few articles which find a market outside of the region of manufacture, but always within the limits of Laos, it may be said that the basketwork industry is an entirely local one.

The Khas, moreover, do not have a monopoly in this industry, and all the inhabitants of Laos are basket makers to a greater or less degree.